

I spend my time just thinking

Tui

The day had been too good.

That should have been my first warning.

The morning unfolded like something from a dream—the kind where everything goes right and you keep waiting for the catch. Yuki arrived early, the guest artist from Osaka I'd been corresponding with for months. She was smaller in person than I'd expected, with close-cropped black hair and sleeves of traditional irezumi that made me want to study her technique for hours.

"Thank you for having me," she said, bowing slightly. Her Thai was accented but clear. "I've heard wonderful things about your studio."

"We're glad to have you." And I meant it. Guest artists brought fresh energy, new perspectives. They reminded me why I'd built this place.

Hong arrived a little later, all smiles and shiny silver hair that caught the morning light. He looked rested, content—the particular glow of someone whose life was currently making sense.

"Nephew duty?" I asked, noting the slight dampness at his collar where small hands had probably grabbed.

"He tried to convince me that ants have apartments." Hong grinned. "I didn't have the heart to disagree."

The morning settled into its familiar rhythm. Cleaning. Tidying. Stocking the shelves with aftercare kits and merchandise. Hong helped me check the online sales, and the numbers were genuinely surprising.

"The baby tees are up forty percent," he reported. "Since Lego did the photos."

"That kid has presence."

I hadn't seen Lego that day, but I imagined him at the flower shop—surrounded by his arrangements, moving through petals and stems like some kind of mythological being. The sort of creature who would grant wishes if you asked nicely enough.

The thought made me smile.

But underneath all of it, a thread of worry was pulling tighter.

Est.

He'd had his session with William today. The big one—the photography commission

for the exhibition.

I'd texted him that morning.

No response.

I texted again around noon.

Nothing.

By mid-afternoon, I was checking my phone every few minutes, telling myself it was fine. Est was working. Est was focused. Est was a professional who didn't need to text me every hour.

But the silence felt wrong.

It felt like holding your breath and waiting for something to break.

The afternoon brought clients.

I lost myself in the work for a while—the familiar buzz of the machine, the concentration required to execute clean lines, the quiet satisfaction of watching art take shape on skin. Yuki worked on her final session of the day, an intricate sleeve extension that would take hours. Hong had his own appointment—black lettering, something meaningful to the client.

The studio hummed with purpose.

And still, nothing from Est.

I tried one more time.

Me: You've been gone a long time. Everything okay?

The response came immediately. One word.

Est: No.

My stomach dropped.

Me: Coming to get you. Where are you?

Est: I don't know. Some park. Near the water.

Me: Send me your location. Don't move.

The pin dropped on my screen. A park I vaguely recognized, near the river, maybe twenty minutes by taxi if traffic was light. I was already moving before I'd finished reading.

"I need to leave early."

Hong looked up from his station, curiosity flickering across his face. He was between tasks, wiping down his equipment, clearly expecting a quiet end to the shift.

"Is everything okay?" he asked.

"I don't know yet." The words came out rough, urgent. I was already reaching for my jacket, my keys, my bag. "Can you close up for me tonight? Yuki's almost finished with her last client, and then you just need to do the usual."

"Yes, of course." Hong's response was immediate, no hesitation. "Don't worry."

I paused at the threshold. Looked back at him—this kid I'd taken under my wing, who was turning into someone I trusted completely.

"Thanks, Hong. I'll text you later."

And I left, waiting for the taxi to appear outside the shop, my heart hammering against my ribs.

The park was bigger than I expected. Trees and paths and benches scattered across rolling green, the river glinting in the distance. The afternoon was fading, the light going golden, and I scanned the space for any sign of him.

There.

A bench near a fountain. A figure hunched over, small and still, like something that had been broken and hadn't figured out how to move yet.

I paid the driver and walked across the grass.

Est looked up when I approached.

His eyes were red. Swollen. The kind of crying that had been going on for hours—the kind that emptied everything out and left nothing behind but exhaustion. His camera bag sat beside him on the bench. That, at least, was familiar. Est would never leave his camera behind, no matter what.

I sat down next to him.

We stayed silent.

I'd learned a long time ago that sometimes people needed space to find their words. That pushing too hard too fast just made them close up tighter. So I waited. Let the quiet stretch between us. Let the sounds of the park—birds, distant traffic, the fountain's gentle splash—fill the void.

Eventually, Est spoke.

"He kicked me out." Three words. Simple. Devastating. I didn't ask who. I didn't need to. "We were—I thought we were getting somewhere. And then he just... shut down. Told me to leave."

"I'm sorry."

"His manager sent an email, Apologizing for the inconvenience. Promising to return my equipment. Like it was a business transaction that went sideways."

"It was never just business."

"No, It never was."

"Come on." I said, standing up and offering my hand. "Let's go home."

Est looked at me. For a moment, I thought he might argue. Might insist on staying here, on sitting with his grief until it consumed him completely. But then he took my hand.

And we walked out of the park together.

The taxi dropped us on the main street. I didn't take us directly to the studio. Est needed the walk—needed the movement, the fresh air, the gradual transition from wherever he'd been to somewhere safe. So we walked slowly, side by side, as the sky darkened from gold to purple to the deep blue of approaching night.

Est didn't talk.

I didn't push.

We just walked.

The city hummed around us, indifferent to our small drama. Restaurants opening for dinner service. People heading home from work. Couples walking hand in hand, laughing at private jokes. Life continuing, as it always did, regardless of who was breaking.

When we reached Ink & Ashes, the studio was already closed. The windows were dark, the door locked, everything exactly as it should be.

Good kid, I thought. Reliable.

I led Est around the side, up the stairs to my apartment. The familiar creaks welcomed us—third step, seventh step, the warped landing.

At the top, I unlocked the door and turned to look at him.

"How about a sleepover tonight?" Est's face was drawn. Pale. The kind of exhausted that went deeper than just needing rest. He looked unwell—not sick, but hollowed out. Like something essential had been scooped away and discarded.

But he nodded.

"Okay," he said, his voice rough. "Yeah. That sounds good."

I didn't want him to be alone that night. Didn't want to imagine him going back to his own apartment, sitting in the dark, replaying whatever had happened over and over until it destroyed him. So I brought him inside.

"Beer?" I asked, heading towards the kitchen.

The apartment wrapped around us like a familiar blanket. I guided Est to the couch—his couch, the one he'd claimed years ago—and went to the kitchen for beers. The cheap kind we'd been drinking since we were barely legal. The kind that tasted like every crisis we'd survived together.

"Please."

He took the bottle without comment. Pressed it to his forehead for a moment before cracking it open.

I ordered food. Made small talk about the studio, about nothing important. Gave him space to breathe, to settle, to find his footing.

"Hey, You're somewhere else."

"I know, I'm trying to come back."

"Take your time."

The food arrived. We ate in silence, the TV murmuring in the background. And then, without warning, the tears came. I didn't say anything. Just set down my sketchbook, crossed to the couch, and sat beside him. Pulled tissues from the box I always kept stocked—for moments exactly like this—and pressed them into his hand.

"I thought—" Est choked on the words. "He said he wanted to try. He said that, Tui. And then he just—"

"I know."

"I don't understand, How can someone say that and then just shut down? How can he let me in that far and then push me out like I'm nothing?"

"He's scared." I said gently. "That doesn't make it okay. But it's the reason."

"I'm scared too." The admission came out ragged. "But I showed up anyway. I didn't run."

"No. You didn't."

"So why couldn't he—" He pressed his hands against his eyes. "Why am I never enough for people to stay?" The question broke something in my chest.

I pulled him against my shoulder, the same way I'd done a hundred times before.

"You're enough." I said firmly. "You've always been enough. This isn't about your worth, Est. It's about his capacity. He's not capable of staying right now. That's his limitation, not yours."

The night wore on.

Est cried until he couldn't anymore. Then he lay on the couch, wrapped in blankets, staring at the ceiling while I sketched the flowers Lego had brought—something to do with my hands, something to fill the silence.

Eventually, his breathing evened out. Sleep claiming him, finally, mercifully.

I watched him for a moment. This person I'd known for years. This talented, desperate, too-much-heart photographer who kept falling for people who couldn't catch him.

You deserve better. I thought. You deserve someone who stays.

But that wasn't something I could give him. Not in the way he needed. All I could do was be here. Hold the space. Make sure he didn't fall apart alone.

I pulled a blanket over him and turned off the lamp.

The apartment settled into darkness, the city humming softly outside. Tomorrow would bring its own challenges. Questions about William. Decisions about the commission. The slow, painful work of putting a broken heart back together. But tonight, Est was safe. Tonight, he wasn't alone.

And sometimes, that was all you could offer.

It had to be enough.

The Morning After

When I woke up, the apartment was still.

Grey morning light filtered through the curtains, soft and diffuse. The kind of light that made everything feel suspended, not quite real. I lay there for a moment, listening to the quiet, before the events of yesterday came flooding back.

Est.

The park.

He kicked me out.

I turned my head carefully, trying not to make noise. Est was still asleep on the couch, curled into himself beneath the blanket I'd draped over him last night. His face was slack, peaceful in a way it hadn't been when he was awake. The tension lines around his eyes had smoothed out. The tear tracks had dried.

Breakfast was a quiet affair.

I moved through the small space with practiced efficiency, pulling ingredients from the refrigerator. Bread for sandwiches—nothing fancy, just cheese and ham with a smear of mustard. Juice. Fruit that I cut into small pieces, arranging them on a plate with more care than strictly necessary. The coffee maker gurgled and hissed, filling the apartment with the rich, dark scent of brewing caffeine.

And that, apparently, was what finally woke him.

I heard the rustling of blankets. A soft groan. The sound of someone reluctantly rejoining the world of the conscious.

"Good morning." I said, not turning around.

"Morning." Est's voice was rough, scratchy from crying and sleep.

I finished with the coffee and carried everything to the small table. Est had sat up on the couch, the blanket pooled around his waist, his hair a disaster of bedhead. He was wearing one of my old t-shirts and the pajama pants I'd lent him last night. —He looked like a mess.

He looked like someone who had survived something.

"Breakfast." I announced, setting down the plates.

Est blinked at the spread. The sandwiches, the fruit, the steaming mugs of coffee. Something flickered across his face—surprise, maybe, or gratitude.

"You didn't have to—"

"Eat." I pushed a plate toward him. "You barely touched dinner last night."

He didn't argue.

We ate with the TV on in the background. Some morning show, bright and cheerful and utterly meaningless. The hosts chattered about celebrity gossip and cooking tips, their voices filling the silence so we didn't have to. I watched Est pick at his food. He ate slowly, mechanically, like someone going through the motions rather than someone who was actually hungry. But he was eating. That was something.

"So," I said, keeping my tone light. "I should tell you about Yuki."

Est looked up. "Yuki?"

"The guest artist from Japan. She arrived yesterday—right before everything..." I waved my hand vaguely. "She's incredible. Traditional irezumi style. She'll be with us for two weeks."

"That sounds amazing." Est's voice was flat, but there was a flicker of genuine interest in his eyes. "I'd like to meet her."

"You will. Today, if you want."

I told him about the morning—about Hong arriving with his shiny hair and stories about his nephew, about the routine of cleaning and organizing, about the online sales that had been steadily climbing.

"Hong's been pushing the online store." I said. "T-shirt sales are up thirty percent this week."

I avoided talking about Lego. I didn't know why, exactly. Maybe because Lego was connected to William. Maybe because bringing up Lego would remind Est of the flowers, of the guilt, of everything we were trying to take a break from this morning. —some instinct, maybe, that Est didn't need any more complicated emotions right now. The guilt about how he'd behaved at William's apartment, sitting silent while Lego was dismissed. That was a conversation for another day.

Right now, Est just needed to breathe.

"We should go out tonight." I said, the idea forming as I spoke it.

Est looked at me, surprised. "Out?"

"Yeah. Somewhere loud. Somewhere with drinks and music and people who don't know us." I shrugged. "Maybe it'll clear your head."

I expected him to refuse. Expected the automatic deflection, the I'm tired or I don't feel like it or maybe another time. Instead, Est gave me a half-smile.

It was small. Fragile. But real.

"It sounds good." he said. "It's been a long time since we went out at night."



Something loosened in my chest. Relief, maybe. Or hope.

"Then it's a date." I stood, gathering the empty plates. "But first—showers. You look like something the cat dragged in."

"Gee, thanks."

"I'm just being honest."

Est threw a pillow at me. I caught it, laughing, and the sound felt good. Normal.

We showered and dressed.

Est ended up in my clothes again—black jeans, a oversized shirt that looked better on him than it ever did on me. He looked better, though. Cleaner. More present.

He helped me wash the dishes, working in companionable silence, our shoulders occasionally brushing as we moved around the small kitchen. It felt domestic. Comfortable. The kind of easy intimacy that came from years of friendship.

"Ready?" I asked, drying my hands.

"Ready."

We headed downstairs to the studio.

The space was spotless. Hong had done an excellent job closing up last night—everything in its place, surfaces wiped down, equipment properly stored. I made a mental note to thank him properly later. Est wandered through the studio, running his fingers along the counter, looking at the displays. He seemed calmer here, surrounded by familiar things. The studio had always been a refuge for both of us—a place where work provided structure, where creativity provided escape.

"What needs doing?" he asked.

"Not much." I pulled out my laptop. "Want to help me check the online orders? Go through the messages, see if there's anything urgent?"

"Sure."

He settled into the chair beside me, and we worked together in quiet focus. It was good—having something to do, something concrete and manageable. A distraction from the chaos inside his head. I gave the physical space a light cleaning while he scrolled through the dashboard. More a formality than a necessity—Hong really had been thorough. I wiped down surfaces that were already clean, straightened displays that were already straight, just to keep my hands busy.

Then my phone buzzed.

I expected a selfie. Or a joke. Hong had a habit of sending random photos throughout the day—his nephew making faces, something funny he'd seen on the street, sketches he was working on.

Instead:

Hong: I won't be going today, personal problems. Hope everything is okay with you having to leave early yesterday. Say hi to Yuki, good luck.

I stared at the message.

No emojis. No casual tone. No "lol" or "haha" or any of the softening language Hong usually peppered his texts with. I frowned. No emojis. No jokes. No casual "P'Tui." This wasn't like Hong. "Personal problems" usually meant a hangover or a family dinner he couldn't get out of, but he always phrased it with humor. This felt... heavy.

Something was wrong.

My first instinct was to call. To demand details, to push, to fix whatever had gone wrong. But I was at the studio. Est was here, fragile and needing stability. And Hong had said personal problems—which meant he probably didn't want to explain over text.

I typed back carefully:

Me: Take care of yourself. Yesterday was... complicated. We'll talk later.

I considered saying more. Considered asking what happened, if he needed anything, if I should come over after work. But Hong was private. He'd tell me when he was ready.

And besides—I was already thinking about what to share with him. About Est. About William. The situation was complicated, full of details that weren't mine to spread. But Hong had a way of seeing things clearly, cutting through the emotional noise to the core issue.

If I tell him too much, I thought, he'll probably say something psychological about how Est seeks out toxic relationships and how he should also go to therapy.

Hong's parents had both worked in the psychological field—his mother a counselor, his father a psychiatrist. He'd grown up surrounded by the language of mental health, the frameworks for understanding dysfunction. He had an easy way of detecting red flags in people. An almost clinical precision that could be helpful or brutal, depending on how you felt about having your patterns analyzed.

Est didn't need that right now. He needed comfort, not diagnosis. Later, maybe.

When he was stronger. When he could hear the hard truths without breaking.

The bell above the door chimed. I looked up to see Yuki entering, her bag slung over one shoulder, her expression curious as she took in the scene—me at the counter, Est at the laptop, the morning light spilling through the windows.

"Good morning," she said, her accented Thai warm and careful. "I hope I'm not too early."

"Not at all." I stood, gesturing toward Est. "Yuki, this is Est. He's a photographer—works with us on promotional stuff. Est, this is Yuki, our guest artist from Osaka."

Est rose from his chair, extending a hand. "It's nice to meet you. Tui told me about your work—I'd love to see it sometime."

Yuki's face brightened. "And I'd love to see yours. Tui mentioned you have a good eye."

The exchange was polite, professional. But I could see Est straightening slightly, some of the heaviness lifting from his shoulders. Being introduced as a photographer, as someone with skills and value—it reminded him who he was outside of his heartbreak.

Good, This is what he needs.

The work began. Both Yuki and I only had one confirmed session each—regular clients with scheduled appointments. The rest of the day would depend on walk-ins, the people who saw the neon sign and decided on impulse that today was the day they'd finally get that tattoo they'd been thinking about.

Est, without being asked, pulled out his camera. "Mind if I take some shots?" he asked. "For social media. Behind-the-scenes stuff, artist profiles, that kind of thing."

"Please do." Yuki said, already setting up her station. "I would appreciate having documentation of my time here."

I nodded. "You know you're always welcome to shoot."

And so he did.

I watched him work between my own tasks—the way he moved around the studio, finding angles, adjusting for light, capturing moments without disrupting the flow. His camera became an extension of his hands, his focus sharp and intent. This was what Est did when he was hurting. He worked. He created. He channeled everything into his art because it was the only language he knew for processing pain. It wasn't healthy, exactly. But it was better than nothing.

The day unfolded in steady rhythm.

My confirmed client arrived—a repeat customer, here for the next phase of a large back piece. I lost myself in the work, the familiar buzz of the machine, the concentration required to execute clean lines. Yuki's session was equally complex—a detailed floral arrangement on someone's forearm, rendered in the traditional Japanese style with its bold outlines and careful shading.

Est moved between us, capturing everything. The close-ups of hands at work. The expressions on clients' faces. The small moments of connection between artist and canvas.

By early afternoon, we'd each finished our scheduled appointments and two walk-ins had come through. A small butterfly for a nervous college student. A memorial piece for a man who'd lost his father.

Through it all, Est was there. Working. Present. He's going to be okay, I thought again. We all are.

As the afternoon wore on, I found myself thinking about the evening ahead. Somewhere loud. Somewhere with drinks and music. Somewhere Est could lose himself for a few hours, forget about William and his exhibition and everything that had gone wrong.

It wouldn't fix anything. Nothing fixed heartbreak except time. But it might help. Might remind Est that there was a world outside of his pain.

I glanced at him across the studio—crouched beside Yuki's station, camera raised, capturing the final details of her piece. He caught my eye and gave me a small nod. A silent acknowledgment.

It was good to hear the shutter again. It meant he wasn't broken. Just bruised.

The day wound down slowly.

Yuki finished her last walk-in around six—a small lotus flower on a woman's ankle, delicate and precise. She packed up her equipment with the same methodical care she brought to everything, each tool returned to its designated place.

"Thank you for today," she said, bowing slightly as she headed for the door.

"Safe travels."

The bell chimed as she left, and the studio fell quiet.

I checked my phone. Nothing new from Hong—just that single message from this morning, sitting there like a question mark. Personal problems. The words nagged at me, but I pushed them aside. Hong would reach out when he was ready.

I also noticed I hadn't seen Lego all day. Usually, he'd pass by the window at some point—walking to the flower shop, coming back from a delivery, just existing in the neighborhood that had become his world. But today, nothing. The street outside had been full of strangers. Strange, but probably nothing.

Est was at the counter, scrolling through the photos he'd taken. His face was lit by the screen, expression focused, almost peaceful.

"Good shots?" I asked.

"Some decent ones." He turned the camera to show me—Yuki's hands at work, the curve of a fresh tattoo, the concentration on a client's face. "I'll edit them tonight. Or tomorrow. Whenever."

"No rush."

He nodded, powering down the camera. "Ready to close up?"

"Almost."

We moved through the closing routine together.

Est knew the drill—he'd helped often enough over the years. He wiped down the front counter while I checked the equipment. He swept the floor while I counted the register. We worked in comfortable silence, the kind that didn't need filling. By seven, everything was done. The neon sign flickered off. The door locked behind us. We climbed the familiar stairs to my apartment, the creaks marking our passage like old friends.

Dinner was simple. Leftover curry from the freezer, reheated and served over rice. We ate at the small table, the TV murmuring in the background, neither of us really watching.

Est seemed better than this morning. Not healed—nowhere close to healed—but more present. Less like someone watching their own life from a distance.

"Sooo." I said, pushing my empty plate aside. "Still up for going out?"

Est looked at me. For a moment, I thought I saw hesitation—the pull toward staying in, staying safe, staying wrapped in blankets and grief.

But then he nodded.

"Yeah," he said. "Let's do it."

We took the bus to Est's apartment.

It was a longer journey than necessary, but Est insisted. He needed clothes—his own clothes, not my borrowed t-shirts and honestly, I think he needed to see his

space. To remind himself that he had a life outside of the couch where he'd slept last night. The apartment small but tidy. Est moved through it efficiently, pulling options from his closet while I waited on the edge of his bed.

"What do you think?" He held up a black button-down. "Too much?"

"For a bar on a weeknight? Maybe a little."

He put it back, considered another option. Eventually, he settled on dark jeans and a fitted grey shirt that made his shoulders look broader than usual. His hair was styled back, slick and sharp. He'd applied eyeliner—smudged just enough to look dangerous, applied cologne from a bottle I didn't recognize.

He looked good.

He looked like someone trying very hard to convince himself he was okay.

"Ready?" I asked.

"Ready."

The bar was the kind of place we used to frequent years ago.

Dim lighting. Loud music. Bodies pressed together on a dance floor that was really just a cleared space between tables. The kind of venue where you came to forget, not to remember.

We found a spot at the bar and ordered drinks. Whiskey for me, something colorful for Est that came with an umbrella he immediately discarded.

"Cheers." I said, raising my glass.

"Cheers."

We drank.

The first hour was good. We talked—about the studio, about Yuki's technique, about the online sales and the future and everything that wasn't William. Est laughed a few times, real laughs that reached his eyes. The alcohol loosened something in him, softened the sharp edges of his pain.

By the second hour, he was on his fourth drink.

"Maybe slow down." I suggested, sliding a glass of water toward him.

"I'm fine." He pushed it away, reaching for his nearly-empty cocktail instead.

"Est—"

"I said I'm fine."

His tone was sharper than I expected. I backed off, watching as he drained the last of his drink and signaled the bartender for another.

One night of bad decisions won't kill him.

The guy appeared. Tall. Dark hair. The kind of casual confidence that came from knowing you looked good and expecting others to notice. He approached Est with practiced ease, leaning in to say something I couldn't hear over the music.

Est laughed.

And then they were dancing.

I watched from the bar, nursing my whiskey, feeling something complicated twist in my chest. Not jealousy—not exactly. More like concern. The guy was clearly interested, and Est was clearly drunk, and the combination felt like a recipe for disaster.

But Est was smiling. Moving. Letting the music carry him somewhere that wasn't grief.

Maybe he needs to feel wanted.

By midnight, Est could barely stand.

The tall guy had long since moved on—probably realized that Est was more drunk than interested, more desperate than available. Est was slumped against the bar, his earlier energy completely depleted, eyes glassy and unfocused.

"Okay." I said, pulling out my phone. "Time to go."

"Don' wanna go." Est mumbled.

"Too bad." I ordered a taxi, then helped him off the barstool. His legs were unsteady, his weight leaning heavily against my side. The bartender gave us a knowing look as we passed—seen it a thousand times, buddy—and held the door open.

The night air was cool against our faces.

"M'sorry." Est slurred as we waited on the curb.

"For what?"

"Being... this." He gestured vaguely at himself. "A mess."

"You're not a mess. You're having a hard time."

"Same thing."

"It's really not."

The taxi arrived. I bundled Est into the back seat and gave the driver my address. Est's head lolled against my shoulder as we drove, his breathing slow and heavy.

Getting him up the stairs was an adventure. Third step. Stumble. Seventh step. Near-fall that I caught just in time. The warped landing, where Est paused to lean against the wall and declare that the building was "definitely spinning."

"It's not spinning," I assured him. "You're just drunk."

"Same thing."

"Still not."

I unlocked the door and guided him inside. The apartment was dark, the familiar shapes of furniture barely visible in the streetlight filtering through the windows. I steered Est toward the bedroom—my bed was bigger than the couch, and I didn't trust him not to roll off in the night.

"Arms up." I instructed.

He complied, and I helped him out of his jacket. His shirt followed, replaced by one of my old t-shirts that I grabbed from the dresser. His jeans he managed himself, kicking them off gracelessly before collapsing onto the mattress.

"Don't throw up on me." I warned, settling in beside him.

Est laughed—a weak, watery sound. "No promises."

"I'm serious."

"I know, I know." He burrowed into the pillow, eyes already closing. "M'sorry for... everything."

"Stop apologizing."

"Okay." A pause. Then, softer: "Thanks."

"For what?"

"For..." He trailed off, the word dissolving into sleep.

But I knew what he meant.

For staying. For not leaving. For being here when he kicked me out and I didn't know where else to go.

I lay there in the dark, listening to Est's breathing even out.

The night had been messy. Too much alcohol, too much desperation, the kind of evening you regret in the morning. But maybe that was okay. Maybe sometimes you



needed to make bad decisions before you could start making good ones. Tomorrow, there would be hangovers. Headaches. Probably some embarrassment. But Est would still be here. Still breathing. Still putting one foot in front of the other.

That was all I could ask for.

We're going to be okay, I thought again, closing my eyes.

The next day, I woke up to Est panicking.

He was sitting up in bed, phone clutched in both hands, staring at the screen with the wide-eyed terror of someone who'd just received catastrophic news. His face was pale, his hair was a disaster, and he was vibrating with barely contained anxiety. Much better than I expected after all he drank last night.

"What is it?" I asked, rubbing sleep from my eyes.

"My equipment." Est's voice came out strangled. "They sent it to the office. Not my apartment. The office. Where my boss is."

"Okay..."

"I'm going to have to meet Thanat in person just to get my things." He looked at me, desperation written across his features. "I'm sure I'll get fired."

I sat up, pushing the blankets aside. "Nut is a great boss."

"You don't—"

"And from day one, they knew William might refuse the photo shoot." I swung my legs over the side of the bed. "Come on. Shower. We're doing this."

The elevator ride was excruciating.

Est stood in the corner, clutching his bag strap like it was a lifeline. He was wearing my black jeans—his own clothes were still at his apartment—and a crisp white shirt I'd insisted on. If you're going to face your boss at least look like you have your life together. His eyes were still puffy from last night's crying and drinking. His hands were trembling.

I stood beside him, trying to project calm. I knew this office—had worked part-time here back when tattoos didn't pay enough to cover rent. The memory of those fluorescent lights and endless deadlines made my shoulders tense, but I kept my expression neutral.

"Stop shaking," I murmured without looking at him.

"I'm not shaking."

"You're vibrating. It's making me anxious, and I'm not the one who thinks he's getting fired."

The doors slid open.

The office was exactly as I remembered it.

A chaotic symphony of ringing phones, clicking keyboards, and people shouting about font sizes across the open-plan room. It smelled of burnt coffee and printer toner—the universal perfume of creative industries running on too little sleep and too much caffeine.

Desks were cluttered with proofs and mood boards. Someone was arguing loudly about color correction in the corner. A printer whirred and jammed and whirred again.

Some things never change.

And then Nut was walking toward us.

He didn't walk so much as bounce, his energy level permanently set to high. He was wearing a sweater that hurt my hungover eyes—some kind of geometric pattern that seemed to move if you looked at it too long. He held a tablet in one hand and a half-eaten bagel in the other.

He didn't look angry.

He looked busy.

Est opened his mouth, and everything came out in a rush. "I'm so sorry about the session. I know it's a disaster. I can explain—or if you want me to just pack up my personal stuff and leave, I understand—"

"Whoa, slow down." Nut stopped in front of us, taking a bite of his bagel. He chewed thoughtfully, looking Est up and down with an assessing gaze.

"You look terrible."

"Thank you." Est said miserably.

"Rough night?" Nut didn't wait for an answer. His eyes shifted to me, one eyebrow raised. "You let him get wasted?"

"I supervised." I said with a shrug. "He needed it."

Nut sighed, swallowing his bite. He turned back to Est, and his expression softened—that surprising kindness that always caught people off guard because he talked so fast and moved so quick.

"Est. Look at me."

Est looked.

"You're not fired."

The words hung in the air.

Est blinked. "I'm not?"

"No." Nut tapped his tablet screen, pulling something up. "Did you get the shots?"

"I... I got some." Est's voice was unsteady. "Before he stopped the session. But they're... they're not what we wanted. They're technically fine, but emotionally flat. He was guarding himself. And then..." He swallowed hard. "Then he kicked me out."

Nut nodded, as if this was exactly what he had expected.

"William Jakrapatr is a recluse who hasn't left his apartment in three years," Nut said, ticking points off on his fingers as he spoke. "He has a history of mental health struggles. His agent is a shark who protects him like he's made of glass. When we took this contract, we factored in a 60% chance of failure on the first attempt."

Est stared at him. "You did?"

"Of course. We're professionals, Est. We assess risk." Nut smiled—a bright, genuine thing that crinkled the corners of his eyes. "Actually, getting him to agree to let you in the door a second time was the real victory. The fact that you got any photos before he melted down is a bonus."

"He didn't melt down," Est said, and Est heard the defensiveness in his voice—the instinct to protect William rising up even now, even after everything. "He just... panicked."

"Same difference in this industry." Nut walked over to a desk where a familiar equipment case sat waiting. He patted it with his free hand. "The agent emailed me this morning. They're taking full responsibility. 'Personal health matter,' they called it. That means the client pays the kill fee for the day, you get your full rate, and we reschedule when—or if—he stabilizes."

Est was frozen. Processing.

"So... I still have a job?"

"You still have a job." Nut took another bite of bagel, speaking around it. "You still

have this assignment, if you want it. And you still have access to the company therapist, which—" he pointed the bagel at Est "—I strongly suggest you use. This industry chews people up. Don't let it."

Est looked like he might cry.

Not from sadness this time—from relief. From the sudden release of the tension he'd been carrying since yesterday. His shoulders dropped. His grip on the bag strap loosened.

"Thank you," he said quietly. "I thought—"

"You thought the worst, because that's what anxious brains do." Nut's voice was matter-of-fact but not unkind. "Get your equipment. Go home. Take a day to recover. And when you're ready, we'll talk about next steps for the Jakrapatr project."

"If there are next steps." Est said.

"There are always next steps." Nut smiled again. "That's kind of the point. Now, get your gear. Go home. Sleep off the hangover. You look like a raccoon."

He turned to me then, his demeanor shifting instantly from Boss Mode to something softer, more desperate. The manic energy dimmed, replaced by a vulnerability that sat strangely on him.

"Hey, Tui."

"Hey, Nut."

"Have you... seen Hong?" Nut asked, trying to sound casual and failing miserably. "He hasn't answered my texts since yesterday morning. I sent him a picture of a cat wearing sunglasses. It was hilarious. Nothing."

I smirked, leaning against a desk. "Hong is fine."

Nut's eyes widened. "Is he mad at me? Did I send too many memes?"

"He's not mad. He's Hong. He's probably staring at a tree or drawing a skull. Or dealing with whatever 'personal problems' means."

Nut sighed, looking like a kicked puppy in a sweater. "Right. Mysterious. Reserved. I love it. Tell him I said hi? Actually, don't. Tell him I didn't ask about him. Play it cool."

"You're about as cool as a sunburn, P'Nut." I laughed.

"Shut up. Just...make sure he's eating."

"I will."

"He's a good guy." I said, watching Nut retreat toward his office, already yelling something about deadlines to a terrified intern.

"Yeah." Est whispered beside me.

He was looking at the heavy black case on the desk. His equipment. His career. Still intact. William might have broken his heart, but he hadn't broken his life. Not completely.

"Grab the gear," I said, picking up the heavy case myself so Est only had to carry the camera bag. "Let's get out of here before he finds something else for you to do."

I helped Est carry the equipment case to the elevator.

He was quiet on the ride down—processing, I assumed. The relief was still settling in, mixing with everything else he was feeling.

When we stepped out onto the street, he stopped.

"I didn't get fired." he said, as if testing the words.

"You didn't get fired."

"Nut said I did well."

"He said you exceeded expectations, given the circumstances."

Est let out a long, shaky breath. "I thought... I really thought..."

"I know." I squeezed his shoulder. "But you were wrong. It happens."

He laughed—a small, watery sound. "I was so sure this was it. The final disaster. The last straw."

"You catastrophize," I said gently. "It's not your best quality."

"Tell me about it."

We started walking, the equipment case rolling between us. The morning sun was warm on our faces, the city coming alive around us.

"So." I said after a moment. "What now?"

Est was quiet for a long moment.

"Now I go home," he said finally. "Take a shower that isn't in your bathroom. Sleep in my own bed. And figure out..." He trailed off.

"Figure out what?"

"Figure out if I can do this again." He looked at me, something complicated in his eyes. "The session. William. All of it. Nut said we might reschedule. But I don't know if I can walk back into that apartment. Not after..."

"You don't have to decide today."

"I know."

"Or tomorrow."

"I know."

"Just... take it one step at a time."

Est smiled—small, tired, but real. "One step at a time." he repeated. "Yeah. Okay. I can do that."

We parted ways at the bus stop. Est headed home with his equipment, looking lighter than he had in days. Not healed—nowhere close to healed—but better. Stable.

I watched him go, then pulled out my phone.

Still nothing from Hong. That single message from yesterday—personal problems—sitting unanswered in our chat.

I typed out a quick text:

Me: Everything okay? Haven't heard from you. Just checking in.

Then I pocketed the phone and headed back toward the studio.

There was work to do. Clients to see. A life to maintain. And somewhere in the back of my mind, a growing worry about Hong—and about Lego—and about all the things I couldn't control. One step at a time. I reminded myself.